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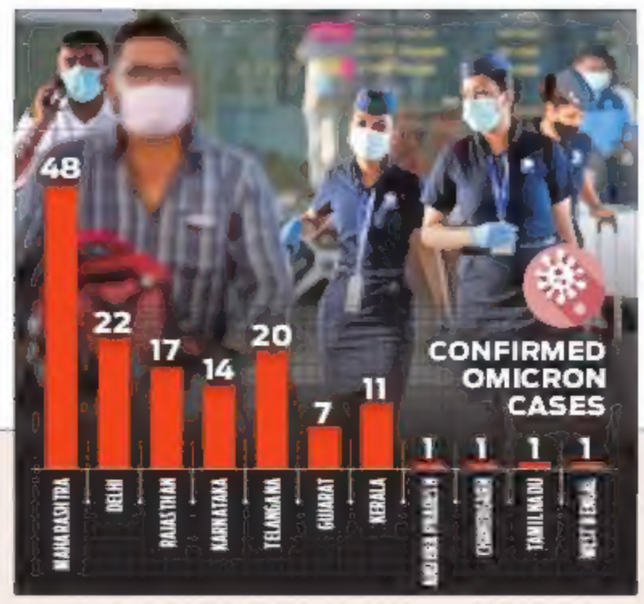

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Govt prepares to review medical infra as expert projects another Covid-19 wave early next year

WHO flags Omicron's lightning spread

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ New Delhi

OMICRON cases are doubling in 1.5-3 days in areas with community transmission, the World Health Organization warned on Saturday, adding that hospitals could once again buckle under high case loads.

As of Saturday, India has recorded 143 confirmed cases of the new variant. The number is likely to go up as genomic sequencing results of many potential cases are yet to come.

Now reported in 89 countries, Omicron is spreading rapidly in regions with high immunity, forcing Europe to reimpose Covid-19 restrictions. But it is still unclear if the ultra-fast spread is because of the variant's immunity-evading ability or higher transmissibility or a combination of both, the WHO said.

Meanwhile, IIT Hyderabad professor M Vidyasagar told media that India will experience an Omicron-driven third wave early next year. Vidyasagar, who is also the head of National Covid-19 Supermodel Committee, said it's unlikely India will see more cases in the third wave than in the second one in summer. Even in the worst case scenario, India isn't projected to have more than two lakh cases per day in this potential third wave, he added, playing down fears of astronomical surges in Omicron cases.

Concerned over possible surges, the Centre is preparing to conduct a review of states' hospital infrastructure, and will be looking at the availability of resources such as oxygen devices, officials told this newspaper.

> While real-world data had earlier suggested that Omicron is milder, conflicting reports are arriving and thus we have to be ready for the challenges ahead
>
> - Member of the national Covid-19 task force

A member of the national Covid-19 task force said the evidence from South Africa and Europe of Omicron's capacity to spread fast and cause infections in Covid-19 survivors and fully vaccinated people suggests the variant will likely cause surges in India too.

"While there is no clear estimate on the extent of the possible surges, we do feel that we may be better prepared to deal with the cases this time," a senior official told this newspaper, hinting at experiences from the massive, deadly wave in summer when hospital systems in most parts nearly collapsed.

How severe is Omicron? Though initial reports from South Africa indicated that most cases are mild, a recent preliminary study by scientists at the Imperial College in London found no evidence that Omicron is less severe than Delta.

The WHO, for its part, said that data on clinical severity is still limited.

MAD-O-METER
TAKE YOUR SHOT
Dec 17 **55,88,939 doses**
Dec 18 **69,21,087 doses**
TOTALS TO DATE AS ON DEC 18

NATIONWIDE	DEC 17	DEC 18
Fresh cases	7,447	7,145
Recoveries	7,886	8,706
Deaths	391	289

KARNATAKA	DEC 17	DEC 18
Fresh cases	238	335
Recoveries	317	286
Deaths	3	5

Seven

OMICRON DEATHS HAVE BEEN REPORTED SO FAR — ALL IN U.K.

IN PARLIAMENT

Electoral reforms bill on agenda

MANISH ANAND @ New Delhi

WITH only four days left for the Winter session to end, the government has trimmed its legislative business. Just three fresh bills are set to be introduced in the remaining days of the current session, which ends on December 23.

These include changes in electoral roll to allow Aadhaar seeding and having multiple cut-off dates to enroll as voter, instead of just one at present. The poll reforms bill proposes to have qualifying dates on January 1, April 1, July 1, and October 1 to allow more eligible people to register as voters. Currently, there is only one cut-off date, which is January 1.

CONTINUED ON: P9

Statue desecration sparks violence along Karnataka-M'rashtra border

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Belagavi

THE defiling of a Chhatrapati Shivaji statue in Bengaluru on Friday midnight followed by the desecration of two statues of Sangolli Rayanna on Friday night and early hours of Saturday in Belagavi have sparked protests and violence along the Karnataka-Maharashtra border.

Soon after a video clip of the desecration of the Shivaji statue went viral on social networking sites, violent incidents broke out in Belagavi as an angry mob of pro-Hindu outfits vandalised public properties besides damaging a large number of vehicles, including those belonging to the police.

Police personnel detain a suspect for violence in Belagavi on Saturday | EXPRESS

An unidentified group of miscreants damaged the Sangolli Rayanna statue at Angol in Belagavi and later another of his statue was desecrated at Sulaga, near Belagavi on Saturday. To contain violence and to prevent the situation from going out of hand, Belagavi Police Commissioner Tyagarajan imposed prohibitory orders under Section 144 of CrPC in Belagavi from Saturday morning till 6 am on Monday. The police registered three cases and arrested 27 activists. CONTINUED ON: P4

EXPRESS READ

Bengaluru Literature Festival takes off

BENGALURU: The tenth edition of the Bengaluru Literature Festival (BLF) kicked off in the city on Saturday, with a special focus on the languages of Karnataka. P2

State logs 6 new Omicron cases; DK sees 5, all of them students

VINCENT D'SOUZA @ Mangaluru

SIX new cases of the Omicron variant of Covid-19 were reported in Karnataka, five of them in Dakshina Kannada district, on Saturday taking the state's tally to 14. Also for the first time, Omicron cases were reported from Covid clusters in the state. Five of the new Omicron cases come from two Covid clusters in Dakshina Kannada, sparking fears of a community outbreak.

Four new Omicron cases (all girls – three aged 14 and one 13) came from a cluster at Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya (JNV) located at Mudipu, about 25 km from Mangaluru. As many as 14 had tested positive in the school on November 22. The girls had symptoms like fever, loss of smell and taste. On December 10, their samples were sent for genome testing and the results came on Saturday.

In another cluster at Srinivasa Nursing College in Mangaluru, a 19-year-old girl student tested positive for Omicron.

She along with 18 other students tested positive for Covid on December 9. The girl was fully vaccinated against Covid in July this year.

Health officials visited both the clusters on Saturday and found all five girls to be healthy without any symptoms. JNV's four girls have since tested negative for Covid in a repeat test.

The sixth case is of an 18-year-old girl who arrived from the United Kingdom. She arrived at the Kempegowda International Airport on December 10 with a negative RTPCR report. But at the airport, she tested positive and was shifted to a private hospital immediately. Her genome sequencing report came positive on Saturday.

CONTINUED ON: P3

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WASH YOUR HANDS REGULARLY
BEFORE EATING
AFTER USING THE TOILET